

Technology doesn't bite:

How computers and the internet can help to enhance your teaching and brush up your language skills.

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Abstract

There used to be a time in which teachers of English in Argentina had very limited options when it came to professional development. Geographical as well as monetary limitations made the number of workshops, conferences, journals and other field-specific information available to teachers quite scarce. Today, thanks to technology and the web, all this has changed. This paper aims at providing teachers with an overview of the possibilities that these new tools and resources have to offer, and suggesting a process that teachers can use to plan their own informal professional development by means of these new technologies.

Teacher Training vs. Teacher Development

In order to get a realistic idea of what to expect from the resources and tools included in this article, it is necessary to define what professional development is as compared to teacher training. The purpose of this distinction is not to say that it is not possible for teachers to receive training through the new technologies available, but to establish that teacher development, not training, is the goal of this article and the resources presented here.

Training refers to *activities directly focused on a teacher's present responsibilities and is typically aimed at short-termed, immediate goals. It involves understanding of basic concepts and principles as a prerequisite for applying them to teaching and the ability to demonstrate principles and practices in the classroom* (Richards & Farrell 2005, p. 4). Training can take many shapes, but mostly we connect the word with either pre-service training, such as obtaining a degree in EFL; or in-service training, such as it could be organized by a school for their staff.

Development, on the other hand, refers to *general growth not focused on a specific job. It serves longer-term goals and seeks to facilitate growth of teachers' understanding of teaching and themselves as teachers. It often involves examining different dimensions of a teacher's practice as a basis for reflective review* (Richards & Farrell 2005, p.5). It is by definition a much broader term than training, and for obvious reasons: "development" might mean something very different to a teacher depending on their years of experience, degree of formal training received, place of work, etc.

Teacher development is in most cases a "bottom-up" process, in that it is started by the individual and not an organization, following the teacher's needs to improve themselves as professionals. This is certainly the case for many EFL teachers in Argentina, who have limited opportunities for professional development sessions organized and/or funded by their employers, and who have to be creative in order to continue learning with little money, little time, and little guidance. It is with the needs of those teachers in mind (myself being one of them) that the workshop at FAAPI 2009 was designed.

This paper offers a summarized version of a possible "action plan" to be used along with the new technologies and resources suggested and listed here. A companion website can be found at www.pamelaarraras.com.ar/faapi2009 with all the links, including the PowerPoint presentation slides and a downloadable copy of the "Action Plan Worksheet".

Introduction to the Action Plan

There are basically four steps to this action plan:

1. Identify your professional development needs: What do you want to learn? The following list contains suggested areas of improvement to brainstorm ideas and find a starting place. Choose one, or many, or even add some of your own. The areas included can fit into one or more categories too.
 - 1) Subject matter knowledge: areas that involve skills specific to *language* teaching.
 - i. Language
 - 1) Skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening)
 - 2) Grammar
 - 3) Vocabulary
 - 4) Discourse
 - 5) Pronunciation
 - 6) Second Language Acquisition
 - 7) Linguistics
 - 8) Cultural background information: history, literature, geography, etc.
 - 9) Intercultural awareness.
 - ii. Methodology
 - 1) Communicative approach
 - 2) Task Based learning
 - 3) Computer Assisted Learning
 - 4) Content Integrated Language Learning
 - iii. Curriculum/materials development. Syllabus design.
 - iv. Assessment, evaluation & testing
 - 2) Pedagogical expertise: specializations and ability to teach different areas or skills *within* language teaching.
 - i. ESP (English for Specific Purposes)
 - ii. EAP (English for Academic Purposes)
 - iii. International Exams: TOEFL, GRE, FCE, IELTS, CPE, etc.
 - iv. Teaching young learners/teenagers/adults.
 - v. Becoming a teacher trainer.
 - vi. Learning more about program management.
 - 3) Self awareness: principles, values, strengths and weaknesses. For Non-native English teachers, also includes issues such as beliefs about our roles, capabilities and language skills.
 - 4) Understanding of learners:
 - i. Learning styles
 - ii. Multiple intelligences
 - iii. Grouping techniques: pair work, group work, etc.
 - iv. Motivation
 - v. Discipline
 - vi. Classroom interaction.

2. Establish goals for your professional development activities: What do want to do with that knowledge? Possible goals are:
 - 1) Publishing an article for an electronic journal such as: The Internet TESL Journal (<http://iteslj.org/>), TEFL.net (<http://edition.tefl.net/>), or TESL-EJ (<http://tesl-ej.org>).
 - 2) Reviewing books for online journals such as the ones already mentioned. For guidance on how to do that, read the Reviewer's Guide at <http://www.tefl.net/reviews/reviewers-guide.htm>, and the Book Review Policy at <http://tesl-ej.org/revpolicy.html>.
 - 3) Making a PowerPoint presentation and share it online at www.scribd.com
 - 4) Writing your own blog or electronic journal. Use www.edublogs.org to host your page, as they have superb support and a community of educators who help each other a lot. If you have a Hotmail or Gmail e-mail account, use GoogleSites or WindowsLive Spaces which are included in your account.
 - 5) Designing activities and materials for your students and sharing them online at places such as <http://a4esl.org>. Find the instructions to designing quizzes for them at: <http://a4esl.org/t.html>.
 - 6) Preparing a "virtual workshop" for your peers by making a slideshow with audio and uploading it to www.YouTube.com or www.TeacherTube.com.

3. Choose tools to help you organize all the information and resources that you will collect during the process. Navigating the web seems easy but it is full of digressions and distractions. To avoid that, the following tools can be of use:
 - 1) Get an e-mail account. You will need it if you want to subscribe to newsletters, open account with interesting sites that allow you to download materials, etc. My suggestion is to get a Gmail account (www.gmail.com), since it includes many other services that may come in handy, such as a free website, etc.
 - 2) Bookmark pages that you find useful to a social bookmarking account such as <http://del.icio.us> or www.diigo.com. I recommend Diigo as it has an educators version (available at <http://www.diigo.com/education>) and also teachers can join groups that share their interests (see Group search engine at <http://groups.diigo.com/>). Active groups include: Classroom2.0 and Resources for Languages. For an explanation of what social bookmarking is, watch the video called "Social Bookmarking in Plain English" at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x66lV7GOcNU>
 - 3) Subscribe to different blogs and RSS feeds so that you don't have to come back to a blog to see if the author has published something new. Good RSS aggregators are: Google Reader, Netvibes, and Bloglines. I suggest Google Reader, as it is the most user-friendly of the three. For an introduction to RSS and subscribing to blogs, watch the video "RSS in Plain English" at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0klgLSxGsU&feature=channel>.
 - 4) Download iTunes or similar audio players that allow subscribing to podcasts. A description of what podcasting is, along with a list of useful podcasts to listen to connected to EFL can be found at: <http://pamelaarraras.com.ar/tesol2009/podcasts-for-cpd>. Podcasts can also be downloaded to an mp3 player or sometimes even cell phones.

4. Decide on tools, sites and gadgets to help you achieve that goal. The ones mentioned above are just a few; for a more comprehensive list and ideas according to the objectives and goals chosen, go to www.pamelaarraras.com.ar/faapi2009.

The Action Plan in Detail: Finding resources for development online

Once decided on the areas for professional development, the next task is to find places where we can get information or start learning about them. Although it is possible to start by "googling" some keywords, I have found that after an initial search, the best thing to do is to explore some good websites in detail, especially if they have a "Links" or "Resources" section that can lead to other useful sites.

Online resources can be mostly divided into those that are "self-access" resources such as an online e-book (See Project Gutenberg); and those that involve interaction with peers, facilitators and other experts by means of synchronous or asynchronous communication. One of the most important sources of synchronous interaction is that of webinars. The list below includes places where you can look for future webinars available, as well as recordings of past webinars. Regarding asynchronous interaction, one of the most powerful opportunities for development is that of social networks. Ning is a social network platform that allows teachers to interact asynchronously with fellow educators who share their same interests. The list below includes some examples of networks that have been created for EFL teachers. You need to sign up to access the content, as they are not open to the general public to prevent spam messages and other inconveniences.

Make sure you subscribe to any newsletters or mailing lists they might have in connection to your area of interest. The following is a small list of EFL sites that can help with an initial search. All sites are free.

Journals & Databases

<http://tesl-ej.org>

<http://www.jalt-publications.org/jj/archive/> Japan Association of Language Teachers' Journal

<http://iteslj.org/> The Internet TESL Journal

<http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/~tesl-l/> - Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages mailing list.

<http://www.eric.ed.gov> The Education Resources Information Center database. Make sure you check the option "Full text availability" on the advanced search to find complete materials.

<http://oro.open.ac.uk/> Open Research Online is the Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs. It is an Open Access resource that can be searched and browsed freely by members of the public.

http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/subject_matter.php Asian EFL Journal Archive

EFL Teachers Communities and Portals:

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/eltecs> The English Language Teaching Contacts Scheme is an information-sharing and teacher development network. Through ELTeCS, ELT professionals can make new contacts, share information, build their knowledge, and create partnerships.

<http://eflclassroom.ning.com/>

<http://efluniversity.ning.com/>

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/>

<http://cuentacuentos.ning.com/> (Storytelling for language learning)

http://www.wikieducator.org/Professional_Development/Integrating_Technology/EFL

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/>

<http://www.cambridge.org/elt/resources/appliedlinguistics/>

Webinars

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/marketplace/webinars/webinars.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/teachers/webinar/archive.html>

<http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/print/htdocs/smu/webinars/upcoming.htm>

<http://www.learner.org/resources/series201.html?pop=yes&pid=2108#>

<http://www.teachertrainingvideos.com/>

<http://community.discoveryeducation.com/>

Websites to develop your language skills

<http://www.librarything.com/> Online book clubs

<http://librivox.org/> Free audio books in English

http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main_Page Huge archive of free downloadable books (all legal!)

<http://www.forvo.com/> hear the words pronounced by native speakers

http://www.cambridge.org/elt/resources/skills/pron_podcasts.htm Words alive: Pronunciation podcast

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/transform/teachers/specialist-areas/pronunciation/websites-discussion-lists> Pronunciation Websites & Discussion Lists

Websites with authentic videos

Movie Image Archive - <http://www.archive.org/details/movies>

PBS - <http://www.pbs.org/video/>

Teacher Tube - <http://www.teachertube.com/>

Biography - <http://www.biography.com/video/index.jsp>

CNN Student News - <http://www.cnn.com/studentnews/>

Animal Planet - <http://animal.discovery.com/videos/>

Teachers TV - <http://www.teachers.tv/>

EduTube - <http://www.edutube.org/>

Free TV Channels: Education section - <http://www.tvchannelsfree.com/channels/5/Education>

Teachers Domain - <http://www.teachersdomain.org/>

Online Videos for Language Development - <http://nikpeachey.blogspot.com/2008/12/online-video-for-language-development.html>

Software & info on how to download videos:

VDownloader - <http://download.cnet.com/VDownloader/>

[3000-2071_4-10888393.html?tag=mncol](http://www.download.cnet.com/VDownloader/3000-2071_4-10888393.html?tag=mncol)

You Tube Downloader - <http://youtubedownload.altervista.org/>

OneStop English guide on how to download & upload a video -

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/section.asp?catid=59960&docid=156001>

Conclusion

This article has intended to give teachers a very shallow overview of what the possibilities are for professional development when it comes to the new web 2.0. In the XXI century teachers cannot afford to stay behind. Our students are using podcasts, mp3 players and uploading content and videos to the web; as professionals we cannot pass on this opportunity to use all these free resources to our and our students' advantage. Let the adventure begin!

Works cited:

Richards, J. and Farrell, T. (2005) Professional Development for Language Teachers, CUP